Snapshots of Sanctuary : Self-definitions of immigrant support in Eugene, Oregon

Academic Essays

ABSTRACT

Since its inception in the 1980s, the US 'Sanctuary Movement' has been the source of contentious political debate and academic discussion. Although originally a clergy- based effort of transnational activism, 'sanctuary' has since diffused beyond the bounds of any one movement or social denomination. In this ethnography, 'sanctuary' is examined as a term inflected in diverse, instrumental, and meaningful ways by those participating in immigrant-support groups and non-profits in Eugene, Oregon. Research was conducted over a two-month period from August through September 2019 and funded by the London School of Economics' Summer Ethnographic Project.

keywords: sanctuary, asylum-seekers, undocumented immigrants, social activism, volunteering, US immigration policy, moral regimes, contested legality

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On a crisp, sunny Saturday morning, I met an elderly couple for coffee at the Friendly Street Market, a place emblematic of Eugene, Oregon's self-branding as the 'Berkeley of the North.' Proudly catering pricey 'natural' products to a clientele that generally tended towards the left of the political spectrum, it was the favored meeting place of several of my (retired, white, liberal) interlocutors. This particular pair had been recommended as valuable interviewees by contacts at the local church, which I had visited the previous week on a fact-finding mission regarding the congregation's role housing Salvadoran immigrants during the 1980s Sanctuary Movement. After brief introductions, our discussion took on a comfortable cadence despite the somber content; they had both been active with the American organisation 'Witness for Peace' — Paul (1) as a long-term photographer and Pam as program director — spending years of their lives documenting the atrocities committed by the US-supported Contras against Nicaraguan civilians. Over the decades they had

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continued to make trips 'down' to reconnect with the individuals they had met in Central America and from their combined written and visual works had produced a book, published in 2013. Its glossy pages featured large black and white pictures of individuals and families, accompanied by parallel texts in Spanish and English, preserving the words 'as they were spoken' of those depicted.

With the sunlight slowly spreading across the patio and our coffees gone cold, I took out the book, newly purchased from a local bookshop. Paul rummaged in his black rucksack for his special 'signature pen,' while Pam revealed with a teasing smile that he brought it everywhere, even on their backpacking trips. An unpretentious black rollerball, this pen — used to inscribe a personal message from the author to the holder of the book representing the culmination of their lives' work — had been carried up and down mountains on the back of a man well into his eighties. Though physically light, it was a weighty symbol of accomplishment, commitment, and continual aspiration, metaphorically contributing to the stoop in this man's shoulders and the deep creases bracketing his still-bright eyes. These two 'witnesses' to decades of turmoil wrought by American hypocrisy carried the stories and images of their Nicaraguan interlocutors with them always, refusing to lay them down even in their hard-earned years of retirement. Perhaps it was also a comfort in these troubling times to possess *real*, tangible, memory-laden proof of the part they had played in counteracting the forces of xenophobia and neo-imperialism in the best way they personally could.

That evening, with their book weighing down my own backpack, I climbed Skinner's Butte, looked out over the city of Eugene — its leafy streets cast in the golden hue of dusk — and rewrote the (provisional) thesis of this paper. Against my expectations, it emerged as a response to the distinctly sceptical theories with which I had read in preparation for fieldwork. I'd like to call it my contribution to activist anthropology, but perhaps it is more of a personal challenge; right now, in this world we've inherited, it's too easy to be a critic. Over the previous weeks, the word 'well-intentioned' had surfaced in my mind and emanated from my lips, a descriptor which seemed to capture the ambiguities performed by those seeking to 'welcome' and support immigrants into this self-consciously (largely) homogeneous locale. I realized then, however, that focusing on the ethically problematic consequences of those unintentionally replicating power differentials (see Bagelman 2013, Perla & Coutin 2010) drew attention away from the *context* of ambiguity — the state-led historical, legal and rhetorical infliction of uncertainty upon the everyday lives of individuals. The members of the immigrant-support networks I spoke with at length over my weeks in Eugene without exception articulated their actions not as driven by civil duty or allegiance to national and international legal precedents. Rather, they spoke of 'waking up', 'feeling fear' and a visceral and intimately-experienced *necessity* to act – explanations that in their reliance on abstractions ('doing what's right,' 'acting on what I believe') reflected the insecurity wrought by (what many per-

(1) All names have been changed to protect the identities of interlocutors.

ceive as) a radical, hateful regression of general American sentiment towards immigrants and the 'Other' since 2016.

The present moment is a profoundly and uniquely disillusioning one; this was reiterated by interlocutors who had lived through previous periods in which national policy provoked public 'awakening' and backlash. With unsettling rhetoric about 'mass raids' and 'crack-downs' emanating from the White House and little verifiable information on the extent of Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) reach into local law enforcement and databases, the guarantee of secure spaces impenetrable to malign insurrection seemed as untenable as a sandcastle enduring the battering of wind and waves. What was, however, acknowledged as constant, reliable, and regenerative were the personal connections formed within the network of advocates to which they belonged. From what I have seen and heard, community organizing and outreach, even on the most informal level, has the potential to crystallize enduring social bonds, to magnify the granular and animate the mundane with the fifth dimension of compassion.

Emerging from these crystallization is a pluralization of a term previously used in the singular, proliferating 'sanctuaries' that are mutable, momentary, adaptive, and tenuous. The strands that temporarily construct and uphold these 'safe places' are woven from the fibres of interpersonal connection and empathy, conduits through which resources and services flow with refreshing reliability. In this way, activism — from grassroots initiatives to enactments of national policy-change — endures, and 'well-intentioned' advocates and allies sustain an affective counter-narrative contradicting increasingly-vocal outcries of intolerance and exclusion. Their 'sanctuaries', exceeding spatial delineation, are aspirational models of what citizenship *could* look like, how 'belonging' *could* be defined. For now, their sanctuaries remain by definition places of exclusion, small-scale reprieves from the antagonism beyond their real or discursive boundaries. When the term is no longer needed — when the specter of deportation or hate-based violence has been vanquished — 'sanctuary' becomes obsolete. There is, then, also something hopeful in its present ambiguity.

Setting the scene

In mid-June President Trump launched a campaign of escalation via Twitter, leveraging threats of imminent 'mass raids' against Congressional Democrats resisting extremist fortification of the southern border (McCausland & Ainsley 2019). These announcements created ripple effects throughout the US, reaching my hometown of Chapel Hill, North Carolina in a flood of email updates from watchdog groups like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and text alerts from grassroots immigrant support groups warning of suspected ICE activity in the vicinity. On 12 August 2019, the eve of my first day of fieldwork in Eugene, Trump dropped another bombshell, announcing a new 'public charge' rule that would allow courts to cite immigrants' use of public services, including Medicaid and food stamps, in determining their eligibility (i.e. *deservingness*) for legal status. Arriving in the wake of this announcement, I personally witnessed how networks that had become primary sources of information and physical resources for undocumented immigrants and asylum-seekers gauged the conse-

quences for those they worked to protect and were propelled with dire expediency into the roles of first-responders.

Eugene, Oregon, population 171,000 (US Census 2020), is located forty miles inland of the Pacific, nestled between rolling evergreen hills generously called 'mountains', small- scale replicas of the giants peaking over the horizon. The tree-lined avenues — exemplary in their grid-patterned legibility — slope down from the hills, shaping the city into a bowl bisected by the Willamette River. Approaching the city-center, wide streets lined with scruffy bungalows give way to neat, multi-story Craftmans, and, finally, to polished office buildings. East of Downtown, multi-suite apartment complexes, brick-pillared behemoths, and perfectly manicured lawns compose the expansive campus of the University of Oregon. A city with many layers, Eugene is a 'village' where wind-chimes, Tibetan peace-flags, and liberal yard signs accompany overgrown vegetable and flower gardens; it is a university town, where the Duck is not a specimen of local wildlife but a ubiquitous grimacing mascot; it is a burgeoning capital — 'Track Town, USA' — expanding outwards and upwards as it prepares to host the 2021 World Track Championships; it is a safe-haven for liberals fleeing the 'red' hills and finding comfort in a bubble of urban 'sanity'; and it is an encampment for the unhoused staking claim to street corners, underpasses and river-banks with tents, shopping carts and bikes overflowing with lifetimes of possessions. Eugene's overwhelming 'non-Hispanic white' majority (estimated 83.3 per cent) spans income brackets and rates of homeownership (US Census Bureau 2020). If extreme poverty (often correlated with substance abuse) were to have a colour here, it would (also) be white.

My interlocutors themselves fell largely within a segment of the educated middle-class that was also decidedly liberal, politically as well as in matters of fashion; hiking pants and tie-dye were not frowned upon as they would be in London. My ever-growing contacts list began with just a few names passed on by my primary adviser in the field, Dr. Kristin Yarris of the University of Oregon. By association, I was already ingratiated those composing the local asylum networks, with whom she had partnered as a Spanish-speaker with anthropological expertise in Latin America. I left each interview, informal discussion or community meeting with the details of further contacts scribbled on my notepad, so that when I tried to visually organise the collection of people whose words comprised the primary sources for this paper, I imagine something like a sprawling Venn Diagram with multiple overlapping and concentric circles of various sizes. Initially, when my focus was on grassroots volunteer groups, the vast majority of my interlocutors were retired, well past middle-aged, and white. Steadily, as my anthropological viewfinder widened in scope and timeframe to include staff members of local and state-wide legal aid centers and resource-providers my perception of the local immigrant-support system grew in depth and demographic diversity.

Contemporary 'sanctuaries'

At the time of my arrival in mid-August, the Friends of Sanctuary group was in the throes of an existential crisis. Having sprung into existence following the 2016 election with a large and diverse membership, the group had been slowly but steadily reduced to just a handful of retirees,

now forced to question a mission statement that had never before been formally articulated. In the self-ascribed position of allies, they had undertaken an impressive letter-writing campaign in response to a 2018 ballot measure, Measure 105, that would have overturned Oregon's three-decades-old Sanctuary Law, a unique and highly-significant policy criminalising the expenditure of public funds to assist ICE. Now that the Measure had been defeated and the 1987 law effectively reaffirmed, the 'steering-committee' found itself navigating uncertain waters. Around a rickety table outside the Friendly Street Market, ideas for a 'statement of purpose' were contributed with an air of mutual consolation for their waning potential as catalysts of communal mobilization.

Later, I met a committee member, Marta, for a one-on-one interview at her expansive home, which doubled as her massage studio. We sat on cushioned lawn chairs beside a landscaped pond complete with trickling waterfall, sipping unsweetened iced tea. She spoke in an energetic torrent punctuated by lively hand gestures. From the group's beginning, she confided, 'we recognized ourselves always as an *allied* organization and we were very, very careful to get our direction from the targeted communities, which here in Eugene-Springfield primarily would be the Latinx community,' adding with pragmatic acceptance that 'it's just time that we evolve.' To her the word 'sanctuary,' featured so deliberately in the group's name, meant 'fostering' and 'bolstering community... opening our hearts and literally our doors to people... because I have privilege.' To illustrate, she spread her arms as if to embrace the entirety of her beautiful sunlit garden and the spacious home behind us. She seemed to be alluding to the tacit consensus reached in the meeting earlier — that the members felt their job was mainly to be informed and ready to 'jump into action' when the next 'big thing' happens. For now, they would be 'welcomers,' politically-informed allies, 'neighbors' who had over the years carved out their own safe spaces in comfortable homes and familiar meeting-spots, yet who remained partially suspended in the ideal realm of intention.

Interestingly enough, meeting bi-monthly in a musty, repurposed farmer's market in Eugene's Downtown, was a coalition whose members were *literally* opening their doors to asylum seekers who had legally crossed the southern border and were awaiting court hearings. At the time of writing, seven individuals, including a single mother with three children, were living in the homes of those (self-described 'empty nesters') 'privileged' with extra rooms and the flexibility of schedule allowed by retirement.

Settled into a velvety, overstuffed armchair in his dimly-lit sitting room — the antique shelves lining the walls practically sagging under the weight of innumerable tomes — *Bill surveyed me through wire-rimmed glasses, the very image of a prolific professor mellowed with age. In measured, chronological prose he recounted the founding story of a local asylum network, starting with a friend's spontaneous decision to 'go to the border and see what's going on there [herself].' Realizing the extent of need amongst those without destination or support state-side, she began to hand out her cell-phone number, 'not really knowing what she was getting herself into.' In the end, an asylum- seeker finding herself stuck in a detention center in Colorado had called the number as a last resort,

and a subsequent 'living room meeting of friends' resulted in the first asylum 'sponsorship,' taken on by a group yet to be named. Soon, one sponsorship turned into several as sponsored asylum-seekers passed on the group's contact information to friends and family in detention; Bill reflected, 'it was a learning curve for all of us.' Particularly challenging was the enlistment of dedicated sponsors and the continuous fundraising required to absorb the fluctuating costs of bonds and legal fees 'because the federal government keeps changing the rules.' When Bill continued his narrative, however, it was with the gung-ho attitude of a pioneer happening upon unsettled territory:

"I think that's one of the great strengths of grassroots operations, is that 'when you ain't got nothing, you've got nothing to lose', as the song goes, and we're highly adaptable- we don't have to worry about covering our overhead. We're fluid in terms of membership. We're only now talking about getting structure, in terms of an organisational structure. So, it's been very egalitarian, which has been really empowering to anyone who shows up- to see that if they put in some energy, they aren't low on the totem pole, they're just like the rest of us trying to figure things out. And we're a little paranoid about the degree of digital evidence we have about who we are. Because we never know if it's going to cross the line into more repression."

Immersed in the story of the network's spontaneous unfolding in conditions likened to 1930s Germany, I was thrown when Bill added, as a side-note, that I probably wouldn't meet the '19-year-old kid' who was sleeping upstairs; she tended to sleep late. Awakened suddenly to the reality of sponsorship, I listened with rapt attention as he elaborated – albeit briefly – on his experience as host. Speaking for the first time with a hint of trepidation, his gaze breaking with mine, he described his association with the asylum-seeker upstairs as a 'father-daughter relationship', admitting that it has been 'curious' navigating his new status as sponsor. He revealed that, at first, she had felt 'she had to ask me for permission for everything' but had since 'made some bad choices' inducing 'some stress that is typical of a father-daughter relationship, I suppose.' My attention piqued by his use of kinship terms, I heard echoes of a conversation that had occurred at the beginning of our interview.

About an hour earlier, after I had launched into my usual self-introduction, his cellphone had rung shrilly and, after a short exchange with the caller, had been placed on 'speaker' for my benefit. Elizabeth was calling to report on a scheduled ICE check-in to which she had accompanied Maria, a young Guatemalan asylum-seeker soon to move into Elizabeth's home. She mentioned that the first officer they had encountered had been 'quite nice' — 'well not *nice* but also not *un*friendly.' While in the office waiting for Maria's paperwork to be processed, they met a Salvadoran family: a woman, her husband — facing immediate deportation — and their two children. Elizabeth, breathless, emoted that 'her heart was just bleeding' for this young family. Before exiting the office, she had given the tearful couple a 'big hug.' Shaken by what they had witnessed — 'we were just *devastated'* — she and Maria were now going to 'do something fun', 'maybe a walk by the river to just relax.' When I met Elizabeth in person a few days later, Maria had moved in and Elizabeth was introducing herself widely as a 'proud mother' of '[her] dear Salvadorian refugee.'

The kind of 'sanctuary' manifested in Bill's pleasantly cluttered house was, then, a front for much more complex processes at work on both practical and affective levels. Not only were the wheels of financial support and volunteer assistance in need of continual greasing, the potential for expansion continued to stretch the group outwards to encompass more and more asylum-seekers with connections to those already in Eugene. From its inception, the asylum network's version of 'sanctuary' was intimately personal, initiated by a physical connection at the border and sustained and expanded similarly through profound emotional connections to specific individuals. Bill and Elizabeth's 'sanctuaries' were also arenas for negotiations of power and belonging, as sponsors suddenly became responsible for the physical safety of people whom they had known prior to arrival only through second-hand accounts of trauma endured in their home countries. Bill, aware that the term 'rescue' contained problematic implications, nonetheless used it defiantly, hinting at meaning behind his designations of 'father' and 'daughter.' While strangers were required first to prove their trustworthiness or reciprocal affection, for such intimate relatives as 'daughters' sacrifices were made without contestation or second-guessing. Furthermore, the parent-child designation held a certain stability and immutability hard to come by amidst the current political onslaught. At the 'Welcoming Potluck' where I next encountered Elizabeth, I took note of her maternalistic remarks and embraces, which Maria received stiffly and with a straight face. Despite this apparent disconnect, however, I saw in Elizabeth's actions an attempt to integrate this new arrival into her own vision of 'safety,' in which the responsible, capable parent unconditionally protected her 'jewel' (Elizabeth's words) to the extent of her ability.

Defining 'sanctuary' amidst structure

This concept of 'sanctuary', connoting a *feeling* of safety brought on by moments of demonstrated social connectedness, was echoed even amongst those who held staff positions at certified 501(c)(3) non-profits or were central nodes of established, time- tested community organisations. In these organisations, higher degrees of bureaucratic stratification and tighter protocol helped circumvent, or at least gloss over, the miscommunications, ethical conflicts, and logistical delays that were common side-effects of 'egalitarian' decision-making processes. The data I collected through interviews with staff and coordinators showed, however, that the reliance of these non- profits on finite grants and their accountability to ever-changing federal immigration restrictions, accompanied by the risk of greater collective liability, shrouded their work in an uncertainty similar to that felt by more informal networks.

The day after I arrived, I met with Marisa, a staff-member at *Centro*, a local non-profit located outside the city centre. Sitting across from me in a windowless room furnished with a mismatched sofa set and a pile of children's toys in one corner, her expression remained set in a pragmatic, emotionless mask, her eyes glazed with fatigue. Her own take on 'sanctuary' was issued firmly: 'it's problematic'. She said that it was a 'beautiful rallying-cry for liberal allies,' and simultaneously heard by those on the 'right' as

'free for all.' In both cases, the term was deceiving and unrealistically totalising. In her opinion, Oregon's 'Sanctuary Law' was vaguely worded in comparison with the laws of other 'sanctuary states,' and its ambiguities brought undue uncertainty into the lives of immigrants and their supporters. According to her intel, ICE was already waiting outside courtrooms and churches, often not identifying themselves as federal immigration agents — 'how can we predict what they will do next?'. Simply, her position was that 'sanctuary' as a term could not describe *reality* for those living in fear.

To her, if it is to retain any relevance, '[sanctuary] is all about offering protection', with family preparedness being central to physical protection and emotional well-being. She pulled out a large three-ring binder and began flipping through the contents: tables for families to complete with important contact, medical and identification info, slots for copies of identification documents, and several pages of 'Know Your Rights' information. She handed me copies of the pages containing the contact information for local, state-wide and out-of-state legal aid and counselling services. First compiled following large-scale immigration raids in the area in 1997, the packet was intended not to provide immigrants with legal advice, but to make them aware of the tools already at their disposal and to consolidate these in an accessible format that could be used in the case of emergency, as well as to protect them from fraud. 'Sanctuary' to her was entirely contingent on the possession of information on legal procedure and personal rights; it was her duty to provide the basic materials from which her clients could build 'sanctuaries' of their own. With these materials individuals could insure their homes and family members to the best of their ability, by taking making legible what they *already* had. In worst-case scenarios, these documents could evidence a generally- recognisable kind of belonging; neat tables and laminated IDs pieced together a life with local connections that would clearly be complicated and destructive to uproot, as attested to poignantly by a woman whose reputation as an anchor of community preceded her.

Carmen, whom I met on a resplendent late-August day at her workplace in Cottage Grove, a town in southern Lane County, was a tiny woman whose slight figure was magnified in my eyes by both her dynamism and other interlocutors' extolling words. Seated at a small table in the corner office she shared with Roberta, her long-time partner at the Family Resource Center, she described in strongly accented English the Language Learner's Program that she led every Friday for immigrant children and their parents. Without a hint of arrogance, she described her own centrality within the community of Mexican families that had begun settling in the area in the 1990s, now expanding to include a growing Guatemalan population. She and Roberta had been at the Center for twenty-six years, forming partnerships across public service and legislative agencies, a constancy that was critical to their role as trusted advisers. When she put on a legal clinic to inform parents of their rights under the new 'public charge' policy, parents actually came, *and* they left, in her words, 'relaxed', knowing there were people there who they could call on in case their status or use of resources were questioned. Because she was also on good terms with the local police chief, she gave each family a contact card with her name and phone number; if they were apprehended or threatened by law

enforcement, she could be called on to 'negotiate' on their behalf. 'Sanctuary' in the context of the Resource Center was a roster of familiar, dedicated support-people, a tool-kit of information on rights and preparedness, *and* a place where basic needs — cans of beans for cooking traditional dinners and child-seats for toddlers — were acknowledged and fulfilled. In bringing together all these components, 'the center allows you be human.'

With an air of finality, Carmen performed a vivid metaphor; her hands spreading across the surface of the table, she explained 'this [America] is a huge wound and it's bleeding, but during those three hours [on Fridays] we're putting a little Band Aid on a little corner of the wound.' With one hand she cupped a 'little corner' of the table – the space they were protecting. 'In that moment, they're safe,' she concluded. Triumphantly, Roberta added 'and they walked today!,' meaning the mothers who had come to the center's open house. They had walked with the confidence that they would arrive safely at this 'sanctuary' created through the hard work and compassion poured into the space by Carmen and Roberta. When Carmen had first moved here, Cottage Grove was 'mostly Caucasian and scary,' but by offering her services, as so many were now doing across the county, she immediately began forming connections that grew deep and branched outwards like the roots of a tree, anchoring herself in this place and becoming the supportive trunk for new growth.

Conclusion

Alma — her tanned, strong-boned face bring to mind portraits of Mayan nobility — acted as another such node of inter-communal contact in her leadership position within Eugene's *Grupo Latino de Acción Directa*, a group providing updated Know Your Rights information and connecting immigrants with local service providers. Sitting across from me at a local bakery, she described her decision to offer her translation services to the above-mentioned church during their 1980s Sanctuary effort as a 'step... into thirty years of war.' For many of my interlocutors, involvement in local advocacy and activism had thrown them onto a battlefield, more literal for some than others. Whether by visiting war-zones, crossing physical borders or attempting to break down less visible walls locally, they had dedicated vast sums and years of their lives to cover 'little corners' of a weeping wound that refused to heal; to many, it seemed it had become increasingly infected in recent years with the germs of xenophobia propagated by the highest governmental authorities. Motivation has waxed and waned along with the activity and effectiveness of the groups composing Oregon and Lane County's immigrant-support networks. The present moment, as well as the best path forward remain unclear and distinctions between the ideal and the real (and everything in between) continue to be contested on a daily basis by individuals who have made it their mission to expand the scope and cohesiveness of these multiple 'sanctuaries.' Alma, her posture straight and her gaze steady, brought it all together:

"...to me a lot of that sanctuary stuff for the state and even Eugene, it's, it's symbolic. Does that that fix everything? And does that keep ICE from coming in? Does that keep our community from feeling any safer? I think probably more important than anything is

that it's an important message that our community needs to hear in order to be reminded that they're not alone....
...being able to be in front of the families and to talk directly and have them see what you have for them is important because it's a reminder. One is, the resources are important to them. The other thing is then they can see a collective of individuals who are there for them, who support them, who have resources for them, so that they don't feel alone."

Almost as an afterthought, she added without breaking the stride of our conversation, 'And the 'sanctuary' stuff has mostly been for *me*; I connect around that with our allies.'

And here is where I read the potential for a different 'belonging' than that recorded in documents and sealed with official stamps of approval, one that stretches across backgrounds, ethnicities, languages and potentially even national borders. At the center of this model is the individual and their own definitions and feelings of what 'safety' and 'security' entail. People become connected by threads of face-to-face recognition and personal interaction, entwining over years or — in the case of great external pressure — months into tapestries of solidarity. As my interlocutors have variously described, 'safe' places can only be created by those who *themselves* feel secure and supported in constructing them, and the construction process continues after immigrants have arrived, weaving those involved into the fabric of sponsors' and supporters' everyday lives. In the case of sponsorship, this interweaving has been rushed such that tears appear that require effortful mending, even some careful unravelling. It is a learning- while-doing, without the mentorship that more established agencies and embedded individuals like Carmen are able to provide through decades of experience and networking. Yet, uniting all these efforts is the reliance on personal relationships and the power of sentiment and empathy to create moments in which *care* is directly felt by those who need it most. Some interlocutors ascribed these moments to the divine while others referred to preparedness packets and legal aides. Regardless, each of their unique combinations of practicality and aspiration had driven them to action, enacting visions of 'sanctuary' that defy essential definition, yet all push back against the singularity and intransigence of 'illegality.'

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